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Literature for Social Change: From Realism to Modernism

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**LITERATURE FOR SOCIAL
CHANGE: FROM REALISM
TO MODERNISM**

Randall Knoper

William M. Morgan. *Questionable Charity: Gender, Humanitarianism, and Complicity in U. S. Literary Realism.* Lebanon: UP of New England, 2004. 251 pp.

Paul R. Petrie. *Conscience and Purpose: Fiction and Social Consciousness in Howells, Jewett, Chesnutt, and Cather.* Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2005. xvii + 234 pp.

For specialists in modernism, William Dean Howells may still figure in memory mainly as a representative of the genteel tradition that twentieth-century writers rebelled against, the man Sinclair Lewis famously called an old maid whose greatest delight was to have tea at the vicarage. The distinction drawn between Howells's Victorian-age realism and the innovations and energy of the new century was sharp, even bitter and angry. But, as Bruce Robbins has pointedly suggested, realism wrongly, repeatedly, and for various reasons has been used as a "scapegoat term that a given author, text, period, or genre can be shown to rise sophisticatedly and self-consciously above" (227). This scapegoating simplifies realism and, in relation to modernism, enables the erection of an untenable division. One of the books under review here, William Morgan's *Questionable Char-*

ity, is part of the series "Becoming Modern: New Nineteenth-Century Studies," which aims to "examine the emergence of modernity in North America and Europe" by shifting attention "from modernity's twentieth-century forms to its earlier moments of uncertain and often disputed construction" (ii). But Paul R. Petrie's *Conscience and Purpose* could arguably be included under this rubric as well. Both books take as their topic US literary realism and social ethics—registering the general resurrection of ethics in our critical-theoretical field. And while their assumptions and scholarly frameworks are profoundly different, both books end up in a similar place, recommending the pertinence for modernism, and for us, of realism's ethical and social analyses and aims. As we entertain the idea that the concerns and conditions of modernism and postmodernism are not that different from each other, their break from realism, these books further suggest, is overstated as well.

The two books also have a number of more particular polemical similarities. Both write against the simplifications of realism that modernist/postmodernist studies have sometimes participated in—the reduction of realism to a servant of the status quo that represents the hegemonic version of reality under the guise of objectivity or the characterization of realism as a cultural function that serves to contain the social contradictions of the society it depicts. This is to say, they are both reassessments of left-political critiques of literary realism. Both argue against the supposed participation of realist writers, at least in any unambivalent way, in US cultural imperialism: Petrie takes on Richard Brodhead and others who characterize regionalism as a tool of hegemony, and Morgan disputes John Carlos Rowe and others who see Stephen Crane as acquiescing to the ideology of empire. Both invoke Amy Kaplan's *The Social Construction of Realism* as an exemplum of the containment hypothesis in which realist fictions serve a culturally conservative function of managing social contradictions; they instead see in realist works a complex social and ethical analysis and an endorsement of progressive and pragmatic reform that we would do well to heed and draw on. They both are about the fate and translation in the post-Civil War era of the moral and political clarity that inspired sentimentalism and abolitionism, and they suggest a similar pertinence of realist ethics and politics for the modern and postmodern periods. Finally, they both make Howells their centerpiece—an interesting development about which I will have more to say. In all, they credit literary realists with a great deal more intelligence about, and resistance to, their complicity with the dominant society and culture than the most influential critical trends of the past couple of decades have allowed. But again, they are otherwise very different books, mainly because they begin in

such different places when imagining authorial subjectivity and its relation to culture and society.

Paul Lauter, in his collection of essays, *Canons and Contexts* (1991), argued that the aesthetic criteria adopted by academic literary study in the twentieth century served to discount, and exclude from the canon, writings whose purpose was utilitarian, especially writings composed to promote social change. The professionalization of modern literary study, he wrote, went hand in hand with the privileging of texts by white male authors and the establishment of formalist standards for judging literary merit, standards that promoted modernist values of irony, textual complexity, structure, verbal sophistication, and so on. Seeing the lingering effects of this in poststructuralist theory and criticism, Lauter asserted the need to reclaim categories of social utility for judging literature: the social and political functions of the writer, the moral view of the social purpose of fiction, the instrumentality of literature for minority groups and for the promotion of democratic equality.

Petrie lists Lauter's book in the bibliography of *Conscience and Purpose*; it's really the only source listed that is not specifically about the writings of American literary realism or the authors in his title. More importantly, Lauter's perspective arguably underlies the entire project. Lauter asks the question, "In what ways does aesthetic merit reside in the production of affect and in what ways in the details of structure?" (104). Petrie provides a historical answer that subsumes the latter in the former, arguing that Howells met the question head-on by forging an aesthetic that stressed sympathetic understanding through literature for the purpose of social and ethical effect; literary form and mimesis were judged according to whether they served this end. Acknowledging that the topic of the moral and social effect of literature has a very long history—and that the hugely effective example of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* lies in the immediate background for American realism—Petrie nonetheless finds in Howells an especially nuanced and nondidactic version of social ethics that he believes can be instructive for our own understanding of the matter. He undertakes, then, the interesting maneuver of returning to the Dean of American Letters, one of the ultimate arbiters of esteemed literature in mainstream postbellum United States, to find a progressive literary aesthetic that can be pitted against a subsequent academic literary establishment that, as Petrie and Lauter see it, now sustains formalism (in poststructuralism), solipsism (in its disinclination to understand sympathetically the literature it criticizes), and quietism (in its defeatist way of finding every impulse toward political or cultural resistance to be unknowingly complicit in dominant systems of oppression and power). These criticisms of literary studies are all

familiar enough, perhaps too familiar. But the usually recommended antidote is not the realism of Howells; that realism, like most realisms, as Petrie notes, has routinely been pegged as upholding the status quo or containing its contradictions under the mask of verisimilitude. Although Petrie never quite makes the argument, he intimates that the disesteem (and near decanonization) that Howells has suffered is due to a modernist-postmodernist recoil from Howells's aesthetic of social effect. In accord with this, Howells's companions in this study are not the other white, male realists whose reputations soared over the last century, but rather three inheritors of his social-ethical aesthetic who, for much of the twentieth century, were victims of a system that meshed a formalist aesthetic with the exclusion from the canon of women writers and writers of color. Petrie joins Howells to Sarah Orne Jewett, Charles Chesnutt, and Willa Cather.

Extracting Howells's aesthetic from his Editor's Study columns in *Harper's Monthly* (1886–1892), Petrie distills it to the idea that literature should promote sympathetic understanding across divisions of class, region, and ethnicity and urge readers toward social action to alleviate these divisions. Thus, enhancing the affective and communicative qualities of literature becomes Howells's aim; his aesthetic becomes an instrumental one. He means to dissolve the boundary between literary and social reality and between the representation of ethical action and his readers' ethical acts. Art becomes equipment for living, and notions of aesthetic autonomy and practices of overt artistry impede this end and rank finally as bad art. Petrie persuasively presents three of Howells's novels—*The Minister's Charge* (1886), *Annie Kilburn* (1888), and *The Vacation of the Kelwys* (published posthumously in 1920)—as depictions of efforts at cross-cultural communication and the social actions that result. Importantly, however, Petrie says these are novels of "perplexed sympathy" and uncertain, anguished attempts to do the right thing (28). The Reverend Sewell recognizes what he calls "complicity" (30), or the social interconnections among people and their concomitant responsibilities toward each other. Yet, Sewell feels, his communications with the young man he has lured from rural poverty to hardship in the city constantly go awry, as do those of the other middle-class characters. They are persistently tainted with class-based misunderstanding, condescension, and humiliation. His efforts to help his "charge" suffer the same fate. Similarly, Annie Kilburn, on her return after a long time in Europe, tries to come to know and do some good for the factory workers of her New England hometown, but her effort at charity, because it is handed down from above and stymied by the systematic injustices of class, is plagued by misinterpretation and limited effectiveness. The Kelwys's efforts to understand and act ethically in their dealings

with the rural working-class housekeepers of their vacation home also result in repeated miscommunication and limited success. Yet Petrie cogently argues that through these fictions Howells works toward a self-consciously limited imperative for middle-class readers to try to understand their "Others" and to alter unjust relationships with them, even if such efforts offer little hope of success. The possibility of acting with goodwill toward these others—even if individual, small, quotidian actions might misfire and seem themselves to be miniscule against systematic injustice—is necessary to keep an imagined democratic future alive. This seems to be the modest, pragmatic, social program that Petrie, too, would endorse, a model that also encompasses the writing and reading of literature and the social-ethical actions these activities might inspire.

But if Petrie turns to Howells for a progressive social-ethical aesthetic, the "Others" who are Howells's comrades here drift away from his exemplary model. Their efforts to adopt, adapt, or resist Howells, as Petrie presents their cases, do not forge a better answer to the question of literature's progressive social effect. Chesnutt, with his explicit agenda of bringing his white readers to an understanding of black realities and thus altering the racist conceptions of African American life pervading the dismal post-Reconstruction scene, seems closest to Howells's aesthetic of both social affect and effect. But he moves from writing across the divide in *The Conjure Woman* to doubts about transforming white prejudice—then to a more polemical fiction and pessimistic view that alienate Howells. His seldom-read final novel, *The Colonel's Dream*, in Petrie's interpretation, offers a white protagonist-reformer who resonates with Chesnutt's experience partly because his reform efforts come up against a racism more deeply rooted and expansive than he had imagined. With his vision of social transformation reduced to modest changes, he falls in line, Petrie suggests, with Howells's chastened but still hopeful social project for literature. But the chastened condition trumps the hope. Jewett, quite differently, works to mesh Howellsian social-ethical verisimilitude with a mystical dimension, an effort that fails in *Deephaven*, Petrie argues, but succeeds in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. However, Petrie fails to note the following: if we grant that Jewett believes the spiritual territory of communion is necessary for a sympathetic understanding across social barriers, gone is the Howellsian interest in social-ethical action, and gone is the rooted social, postidealist dynamic that Howells champions. Then, in Petrie's progression, if Jewett's mystical dimension still serves as a grounding for spiritual communality, Cather extends its logic to the point of subordinating the social-ethical dimensions of Howellsian realism to a symbolism of transcendent spirit, a literature of elemental myth

and essential selves that precedes the social and treats verisimilitude of social and historical process as superfluity; she rejects Howells's social and ethical aims altogether. One is left wondering why Petrie pushes forward to Cather, except to argue that she, too, had Howells as a progenitor. Is the point that she should be affiliated with later twentieth-century fiction that has "found other ways than Howells's to address—or to evade—its responsibilities for engaging readers ethically in contemporary social realities" (194), with the stress on "evade"? Petrie never tells us, and the trajectory of the book, aside from a series of grappings with Howellsian aesthetics, is finally unclear. If the point is to reveal how Howells's social-ethical aesthetic was lost, it is not, finally, driven home.

Petrie criticizes the practice of reading texts to uncover authors' largely unconscious participation in cultural patterns; critics are not smarter than the writers they study, he insists. These realist authors, he argues, wrote with an astute consciousness of their ethical and political contexts and effects. We can learn most from sympathetically reconstructing their intentions, thereby gaining from them a better understanding of the social potential of literature. If Petrie focuses on these authors' intentions to the exclusion of their cultural and ideological underpinnings, William M. Morgan contrastingly focuses on cultural configurations that set the terms for realism. Embracing what Raymond Williams called the "residual," "dominant," and "emergent" in culture (150), he argues that the previous cultural formation of sentimentality had powerful residual effects on US literary realism. It conditioned these writers' conception of manhood, putting them at odds with the supposed masculinist reorientation of American culture that made strenuous, imperialist rough riders the gendered ideal. A lingering sentimental manhood kept alive values rooted in domestic ideals—paternal benevolence, nurturing and civilized care, and humanitarian social commitment. Set against this ethos, formerly grounded in an idealist frame, is an emergent antifoundationalist cultural formation. Recapitulating the argument set out by Brook Thomas in *American Literary Realism and the Failed Promise of Contact* (1997), Morgan depicts literary realism as denying the kinds of foundational ordering principles of its republican, sentimental, and abolitionist predecessors; it believes no longer in right reason or natural hierarchy, a transcendental or religious moral order, or a confident ethical agenda. Unlike Thomas, however, Morgan insists on the residual presence of internalized sentimental ideals amidst this disoriented present.

The dissonance between such nostalgic memories and the experience of a world in flux pushes realism to modernize and adapt sentimentality, to imagine new forms of democratic ethics indebted to it

but responsive to the unmoored conditions of the Gilded Age. Overtly distancing itself from sentimentality, realism still finds value—and pertinence for society and politics—in the legacies of classical republicanism, domesticity, and abolitionist humanitarianism. Realism, Morgan asserts, undertakes a renarration of the sentimental ethos, which in the realist era more often than not ends without answers or conclusions, in the compromise of the ideals of paternal humanitarianism and democratic citizenship, and in a conviction that liberal capitalism has failed to create a humane culture. Manhood is portrayed antiheroically, as helpless, unable to realize the remembered ideals of the sentimental ethos. Even so, realism serves as a conduit that transmits the humanitarian ethos to the twentieth century—because it imagines a "postidealist humanitarianism" (19), a rethinking of the sentimental model, admitting its morally compromised status and its complicity with capitalism, but retaining its concern for a humane social ethics that might be reinvested into an inhumane present. This dialectic in realism between sentimentalism and antifoundationalism makes it "arguably the most important aesthetic mode to arise from a maturing democracy" (184). It also gives realism a continuing relevance for us.

Howells is again the centerpiece: a writer whose conception of manhood does not swoop toward a national myth of rugged individualistic virility—the bravado and aggression that he mocks—but instead is conflicted and tragicomic, while still maintaining a commitment to conscientious selfhood and democratic citizenship. In the background lies the ethos of the republican man of character and principle, sympathy and altruistic care, and conscientious citizenship. But in the contemporary scenes Howells depicts—*The Minister's Charge* and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* are the key examples—such a sentimental ideal appears naïve. His humanitarian models of heroic character fail as they confront the complexities of the postwar order, and these characters experience confusion over their ethical concerns. For Morgan, Howellsian "complicity" denotes a conscious implication in an intricate social reality of flux and limits, where transcendence is impossible and individual agency is often foiled. If the idea of complicity originates in sentimentalism and hopeful humanitarian sympathy, it becomes for Howells the signifier of enmeshment in ambiguous, often incomprehensible, and frequently unjust human interconnections. Howells's typical subject then is the ethical problem of ordinary men (Howells's vision remains patriarchal) with benevolent aims who are knowingly but helplessly caught in systems of injustice and must then live with guilt—their remembered ideals of sympathetic humanitarianism compromised, their ethos of care ineffectual, their dreams of fairness and mercy stymied. The tension between conscience and complicity

that Howells crystallizes, Morgan argues, is the defining structure of feeling in postwar middle-class experience—and, beyond that, the central problem for modern humanitarianism and liberal intellectual culture. In a final twist Howells routes humanitarianism in service institutions rather than individuals—for example, the police and the homeless shelter in *The Minister's Charge*—ultimately validating public benevolence against aggressively capitalist public culture.

If Morgan admirably burnishes Howells's image, revealing complexities and intelligence where previous political critique had come to see ideological containment, he also works to refurbish the reputations of Stephen Crane and Booker T. Washington. Against the tendency to read Crane as easily intertwined with US imperialism and its ideology of racial conquest, Morgan takes Dr. Trescott of *The Monster* as a criticism of aggressive national manhood. Trescott cares for Henry Johnson, the black hostler who becomes the "monster" after his face is burned off while saving Trescott's son from a fire. As Johnson's facelessness challenges the racial categories and explores the racial anxieties that fed white masculine conquest, Morgan argues, Trescott's empathetic grief and nurturing care—despite the social cost to him and his family—resurrect the sentimental ethos of communal responsibility as a counterweight to strenuous, social-Darwinist manliness. Nonetheless, Trescott's efforts are ineffectual, serving mainly as an expression of guilt and still complicit with the racialized and gendered construction of American social authority. Washington appears in this study not as a literary realist but as a figure who has been similarly simplified and reviled as an accomplice of racist society—due to the influence of W. E. B. Du Bois's characterization—and who deserves instead the sort of subtle understanding that the surrounding discourse of pragmatic humanitarianism and complicity can provide. Like the other figures here, his rhetoric draws on republican and domestic languages—his African American citizenship is rooted in the dignity of labor, self-sacrifice and communal service, and collective progress. This is opposed to a Du Boisian heroic, exceptional, individualistic, modernist masculinity that disparaged the Victorian, rural, and maternal as confining and backwards (Tuskegee being the epitome of this). But if Washington optimistically works toward a vision of racial harmony by institutionalizing domestic values in public culture, he combines this residuum of the sentimental with a pragmatic ethics that accepts provisionality in place of absolutes; his realpolitik appeases white racists and the power brokers he hopes to enlist, accepts white superiority, and works within its social structure in order to establish his voice, all the while maneuvering toward democratic humanitarian reform based not on universal ideals but on utopian possibilities emerging from immanent realities. In Morgan's

reading of Edith Wharton's *Summer*, the crucial figure is Lawyer Royall, whom Morgan defines as a representative of a patriarchal republican masculinity and sentimental public benevolence—which lead him to become the guardian of Charity. But the circumstances of his adoption of Charity are ambiguous, and when he proposes marriage to her, the mix in the situation of coercion and gratitude brings out Wharton's critique of the inequities in charitable benevolence as well as her larger critique of the weakened tradition of republican masculinity, the sentimental ideal of public benevolence, and their failed democratic promise. Lawyer Royall is drawn in this novel as a degraded, forgotten man, and just as his charitable action is tainted, the civic ideal he represents is suspect as well. Yet Royall and the patriarchal humanitarian legacy and communal ethos he shoulders are not merely archaic alternatives to an emerging modernity; rather, he models a modern experience of democratic citizenship as a condition of weakness and disappointment, compromise and disillusionment, and complicity in a hierarchical social order that nonetheless coexists with authentically humanitarian and democratic intentions.

To demonstrate this realist problematic as an enduring construct of modernism/modernity, Morgan provides an epilogue that suggests a thread of realist ethics survives in twentieth-century modernism, notably reemerging in the aftermath of the Great Depression in the post-idealist humanitarian institutions of the New Deal era. If so many works of disillusioned, alienated modernism cynically recoil from a seemingly irredeemable realm of social and political engagement—and pointedly repudiate compromised realist visions of humanitarianism as hypocritical—some works (Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*) work through the disillusionment and detachment to provide realist ethics for the bleakness of the twentieth century. The chastened and compromised humanitarian citizenship of the realists becomes the ironic but still committed public engagement and social intelligence of the *Invisible Man*, who adheres to the realist credo of the necessity of continued moral engagement despite the inevitability of failure. Morgan ends by declaring that realism negotiates between sentimentality and foundationlessness in a way that offers us an unfulfilled inheritance of postidealist humanitarian citizenship. It confronts capitalist exploitation and shows us our complicity in it, and without offering false or easy answers to this problem, it holds open the hope for a more humane democracy. Readers will note the similarity between Morgan's bottom line and Petrie's. They both take as template Howells's hopeful purpose and the way it is tempered in his fictions by compromise, complicity, and failure. They offer it to us as a model—to fix, however, different versions of our contemporary problem. For Petrie, the anti-poststructuralist, a

Howellsian commitment to individual agency offers an alternative to our historically conditioned wrong turn into a politically paralyzed literary culture; Howells provides a point of resistance to our own status quo. For Morgan, with his broader cultural theoretical framework, Howells stands as a model of how to understand and negotiate the cultural conditions of a period that follows one of idealistic radicalism. Petrie puts more hope than Morgan in individual agency, but both try to rescue a moderate, pragmatic, middle-class reform from the dustbin of history. We see a kind of coming together from different parts of the left literary-critical spectrum—the canon-busting activist side and the side of cultural analysis and ideological critique—in a pragmatic liberalism. Does this represent a wiser and more practical approach to social change or a retreat from more radical ideals? While those questions linger, there's no question that these books do us a great service in recomplicating our understanding of realism and its relation to modernism. They also serve provocatively to reformulate our thinking about literature, ethics, and social change.

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